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Berthe Morisot and Painted Mirrors

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Abstract

A common Impressionist subject was a woman in front of a mirror. Berthe Morisot, one of a few prominent female painters during the Impressionist era, often painted women in private, domestic settings with those women looking into mirrors. This essay looks at Berthe Morisot's painting of women and mirrors through the lens of feminist theories of looking and gender difference. This is done through close readings of several paintings by Morisot and one of her contemporaries, Edouard Manet. Morisot, as a female painter, portrays a unique kind of self-looking of and by women, in which she paints women who subvert and deny the traditional male gaze through an awareness of their public presence.

When the female subject of a painting gazes into a mirror, that ubiquitous household item, she becomes both the subject of feminist discourse and an artistic portrayal of self-looking. From the moment people began gazing into still ponds, art has complicated the idea of reflections, making them a conflation of mirror image and self-understanding. In paintings, a mirror does not merely reflect the subject of the painting but instead asks the viewer to think about how we look at ourselves and others: our reflections both literally and figuratively. This article explores how Impressionist painter Berthe Morisot, through her paintings of women looking into mirrors, conveys to the beholder not only a sense of women's private moments but also a glimpse into their constant self-awareness. It was common for male artists, such as Morisot's contemporary Edouard Manet, to voyeuristically paint women. His subjects often passively sit at a vanity in various stages of undress. By contrast, Morisot's painted subjects, women who are active and aware, set her works apart from other Impressionists. Morisot wants the viewer to confront the male gaze and ask how it differs from the ways in which the women see themselves. She does that by painting women looking into mirrors. Morisot subtly and intentionally subverts the male gaze both in how she depicts women who are aware of the ways in which they are seen and in her choices of what to portray and what not to portray.

In Morisot's nineteenth-century France, mirrors were an essential part of a woman's life. Mirrors gave women the ability to gaze upon themselves privately, yet create an image meant for the public eye. It was customary for an upper-class woman to apply makeup, fashion elaborate hairstyles, and put together outfits before entering the public sphere. Those activities required a mirror to be done successfully. Mirrors were mass-produced beginning in 1835 after the discovery of silvering, a mirror-making technique that involves pouring silver behind glass to create a highly reflective surface. Before this, mirrors were a status item reserved for the elites of society. Even as silvering popularized, elaborate frames made of precious metals continued to be an indicator of wealth and status. But the more effective and advanced silvering made mirrors accessible to people of varying social classes. This technique also allowed for different kinds of mirrors like the cheval, a full-bodied, swinging mirror (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). The ubiquity of mirrors makes them a common subject in literature and art, often tied to women, vanity, and looking (Goscilo).

Feminist art scholarship criticizes the often-sublimated male gaze, defined by Laura Mulvey as the voyeuristic and violative way male artists looks upon their female subjects (837). In her book *Vision and Difference*, Griselda Pollock, one of many feminist scholars concerned with the sexual politics of looking, writes on the relationship between the image and the beholder. Pollock investigates how the male beholder, and therefore the male gaze, are constantly implied in the consumption of visual art. And while the male gaze spans over centuries, Pollock focuses on the nineteenth century and Impressionist paintings in the chapter "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" (50). In these works, even when the subject is a

woman, she is meant to be seen by men. The traditional masculine narrative states that to gaze is to desire; men reproducing the female nude over thousands of years have showed us this belief. As Valerie Steele writes in her article on Manet's *Nana* (1863), "the female nude, in particular, is a recognized artistic genre" (124). Pollock argues for the uniqueness of female artists within the Impressionist movement. This uniqueness is not the result of gender essentialism but is instead caused by the very separated and constructed social roles of men and women. Pollock speaks specifically to how female artists understood and navigated "what spaces are open to men and to women and what relation a man or a woman has to that space and its occupants" (Pollock 62). Morisot had to be more conscious of the space she inhabited and the ways others saw her. Thus, she painted, with intention, women who are aware of the gaze of their viewer. Pollock calls femininity "an inescapable condition understood perpetually from the ideological patriarchal definition of it" (84). Morisot lived and painted in that "inescapable condition," and it is palpable in her works. She was stuck within a world of the male gaze but painted her female models in ways that subvert that gaze.

Because the male gaze is so ubiquitous, many feminist scholars take up the topic. Laura Mulvey dissects the male gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Due to our "world ordered by sexual imbalance," Mulvey describes how "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (837). Mulvey analyzes how film dehumanizes women by making them an image to be desired by heterosexual men. Though Mulvey writes specifically about cinema, her work applies to all visual art; "none of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, but it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look" (843). The mirror paintings of Morisot and Manet explored in this article are intrinsically concerned with looking. Manet paints women in the way Mulvey describes. His women sit in front of a mirror but are meant to be seen and desired by the beholder. A female artist like Morisot can upset and overthrow this project with subjects who possess a potent subjectivity.



Figure 1 Berthe Morisot. *The Psyche Mirror*. 1876
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

Morisot's *Psyche* (1876) shows a young woman standing in front of a wood-framed cheval mirror. This work illustrates the ways in which Morisot painted female subjects as conscious of the male gaze. We, the beholder, see the woman's profile and reflection in the tall mirror. Her pale dress, golden shoes, and dark jewelry indicate her upper-class status. The white and blue floral pattern on the couch and curtains stands in contrast with the red carpet on which she stands upright. Her chemise has fallen off her left shoulder; she stands with her left hand on the small of her back and her right hand on her hip. The eye is initially drawn to that exposed shoulder, a common reveal in boudoir scenes, but what is significant is the thoughtful and pensive look on her face. We have caught her in a private moment. She appears to be adjusting her clothes. Her eyes are cast downward, and her head tilted slightly forward. Perhaps she is looking at her reflection in the full-length mirror, or perhaps she is trying to tie the back of her dress. Morisot painted not a pose but a woman in motion. While we see the whole body of the standing female subject, the mirror cuts off her reflection below the knees. This reflection is blurred and distorted in ways that she is not. The painting inspires

some unease in the viewer; her mirror image is at an unexpected angle. The woman's reflection appears looking back at us, aware of the beholder's gaze. We see her profile, a position often used to dehumanize a subject, but her reflection faces the viewer, even as the face of that reflection is blurred beyond recognition.

The sexualizing of the female subject in a boudoir was a common Impressionist trope. However, Morisot combats that male gaze with *Psyche*, specifically the posture of the subject and that subject's reflection. Pollock comments on *Psyche* specifically:

"Morisot's painting offers the spectator a view into the bedroom of a bourgeois woman and as such is not without voyeuristic potential but at the same time, the pictured woman is not offered for sight so much as caught contemplating herself in a mirror in a way which separates the woman as subject of a contemplative and thoughtful look from woman as object." (81)

The presence of a mirror arouses the question of looking, and the modest posture of the subject suggests a discomfort with violating looks. The blurred reflection and posture indicate modesty; it is as though the subjects is asking the viewer to avert their eyes. Morisot confronts the viewer's way of looking with these intentional artistic choices. The woman's downward looks, in contrast with confrontational nature of her reflection, imply a heightened sense of awareness. Morisot painted a woman who is not an object to be viewed, but a woman who is aware of how she will be seen. When set next to paintings by Manet, Morisot's choices are clearly distinct and intentional. These choices advocate for the interior lives of women.

Edouard Manet was an influential painter of the French Impressionist movement. He was not only a contemporary of Morisot, but also her brother-in-law. Reiterating that common Impressionist trope of a fallen woman, Manet's *Before the Mirror* (1876) portrays a highly sexualized female subject looking at her reflection. While Morisot's and Manet's works feature the same location and subject, Manet objectifies and sexualizes his subject while Morisot does not. The woman in the painting stands erect; her stiff back, square shoulders, and impossibly small waist leave her naked upper back as the focus. Her displaced undergarment and untied corset emphasize her hourglass shape. The draped clothes give the sense that they were removed by someone other than her. The subject is risqué. Manet himself said that "the satin corset may be the nude of our era" (Steele 124). This painting is one of many where Manet uses clothing to signify class and morality. Steele says of Manet's *Nana* that "the subject's colorful satin corset and silk lingerie mark her as a courtesan" (124). He uses the same blue satin corset in *Before the Mirror* (Stelle 124). That subject looks at a reflection in the mirror we cannot see. It is as though she is presenting herself to the beholder, posing for an audience. She appears to be admiring her own reflection in the way a man might admire, sexualize, or objectify her. The woman's positioning, outfit, and framing display her as an object to be viewed; that is the male gaze at work. Manet suppresses any sense that this woman looks at herself as her self. Indeed, though she stands in front of a mirror, she does not appear to have any sense of self.

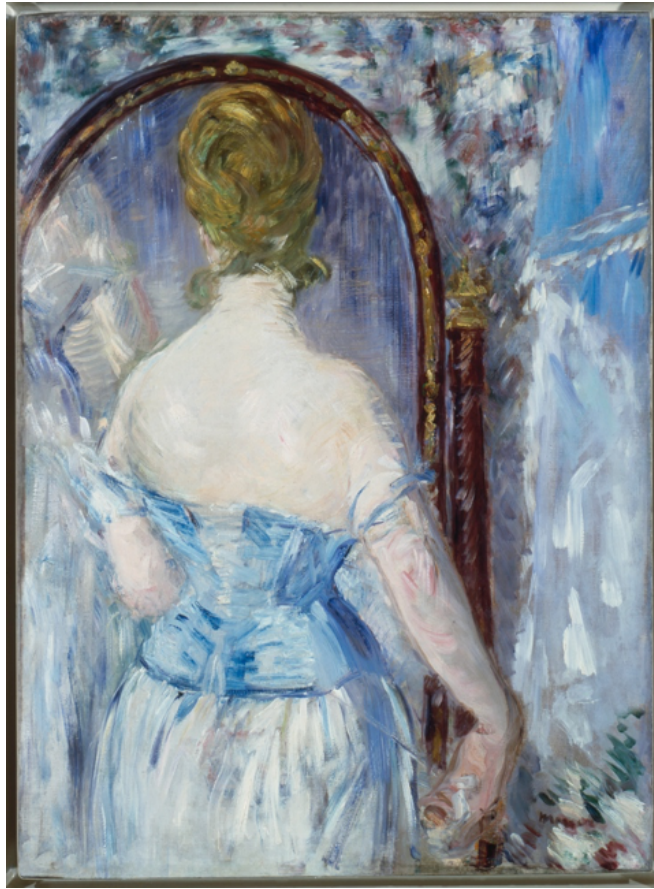


Figure 2 Édouard Manet. *Before the Mirror*. 1876
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Linda Nochlin, in her essay, “Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth Century Art,” explores the male sexualization of female subjects: “the very title of this investigation [...] is actually redundant. There really is no erotic art in the nineteenth century which does not involve the image of women, and precious little before or after” (137). Their female subjects are painted to be on display for and visually pleasing to a male audience, existing only to be looked at and consumed. Tied to the concept of the male gaze, Nochlin writes: “man is not only the subject of all erotic predicates, but the customer for all erotic products as well, and the customer is always right” (138-139). Thus, the beholder can see the sexuality being vended in Manet’s *Before the Mirror*.

Manet’s use of color here also speaks to the male gaze. Colored corsets existed to be seen, at least by one other person, and were therefore the sign of a sexually promiscuous woman. Speaking to the fashion and morality of the era, Steele cites a centerfold from *La Vie Parisienne* from the 1880s; “The proper and virtuous woman wears a white satin corset, never a colored corset” (129). While Morisot painted women in white, Manet dressed his models in blue, another indicator that they are meant to be looked at. The woman Manet painted is not

given the privacy, agency, or awareness Morisot grants her subjects. Manet's female subject is a body, not a person, dressed and posed for the male viewer. It is not only her colorful corset but her impossible shape and her performative pose that suggest Manet's dehumanization of the subject. Morisot's subtlety is thrown into clear relief when compared against this Manet piece. Even when the female subjects of the painting are positioned similarly, Morisot's women possess a subjectivity and interiority wholly lacking in Manet's work. Morisot's women are subjects not easily consumed.

In 1890, Morisot painted *Before the Mirror*, nearly 15 years after Manet's work of the same name. With a more saturated palette and heavier brushstrokes, the similarities between this and her earlier works show her portrayals of women's subjectivity to be even more striking and intentional. Much like Manet's *Before the Mirror*, we see a woman from behind, with her undergarment off her shoulders, revealing her back as she looks into a large mirror. The woman's back is curved as she sits forward on the chair in the middle of putting up her hair, gazing downward. However, Morisot depicts this woman in the middle of an action, rather than in a static pose. We see the mirror clearly, but her reflection lacks realistic details. Her back has greater shading and depth, and more precise brushwork when compared to the reflection, which shows the front of her body. Morisot clearly distinguishes the rendering of the woman's reflection from her actual body. Even though we see the front of her half-naked body in the mirror, the image is not sexualized in the way that Manet's woman is. Morisot's *Before the Mirror* includes nudity, but that nudity is not the focus of the viewer's eye. The blurring of the undressed parts of the woman, along with the much clearer back and shoulder, intentionally pulls the viewers focus to the woman herself, not her image or nakedness. The beholder sees into the mirror the way the woman sees into the mirror—not a sex object but just a reflection. This positioning creates empathy and, as with *Psyche*, implies modesty.

The curved back and arm movements show a woman going about her business, not a woman on display. While Manet's woman is clearly framed for the viewer, Morisot's woman sits among pieces of furniture and different colors, making the painting more about her holistic life than the sexual pleasure derived from her positioning. Given the context of both paintings, it does not follow logically that a woman would be posing in the way that Manet poses his subject; a woman in a private space would be moving like Morisot's woman. In distorting the reflection and painting a woman in action, Morisot creates a portrait that resists objectification and the male gaze. She does not default to that gaze and instead shows a woman in her female-gendered private space.

Morisot made specific choices in where she painted her women. Her domestic settings express class, wealth, privacy, as well as the limitations nineteenth-century female artists who faced restricted access and minimal safety in public space. In *Vision and Difference*, Pollock also discusses space in terms of location and women's relationship to locations (62). Public spaces,

being both literally and morally dangerous for women, were not often painted by female artists. Male Impressionists did not risk their reputations by painting dancers and prostitutes in sordid locations. The painting of upper-class women in domestic situations, in their bedrooms or with children, on the other hand, is a staple of female Impressionists.

Morisot portrayed women by painting them in women's spaces, to which she would have legitimate access. She painted women of the upper class, a small portion of women overall who had access to fine things like decorative mirrors and fanciful dresses. In painting women in these private spaces, along with the women's posture and clothing, Morisot endows them with an interior life. They are private in their painted setting. And yet any comfort those women would experience in real life is ripped away when they, the subjects of a painting, are put on display. Any painting will be viewed publicly, in an art gala or exhibition, by a great number of people, including men. Morisot knew that, so she used the patriarchal structures she lived in to confront that patriarchal audience. Instead of sexualizing women and violating their private space, which male artists were constantly doing either consciously or unconsciously, Morisot places the women in front of a mirror to ensure that the viewer is thinking about the politics of looking. She painted women with the knowledge that real women possessed, an understanding of the way they look as well as the way they are seen. She undercut the male gaze by imbuing their posture, facial expressions, and reflections with that understanding of constant observation. Then, as the subject gazes upon herself, the viewer of the painting cannot see her simply as a lifeless prop. She is a fully formed and thoughtful person, wary of her situation.

Morisot's *Woman at her Toilette* (1875) shows another subject conscious of her audience. In this work, Morisot paints a young woman with light hair looking down at a tilted mirror. Her back is to the viewer, hiding her face. We see her hair gathered at the top of her head, a black ribbon around her neck, exposed and slanted shoulders, and white and blue chamise. She looks downward at a reflection we cannot see with one hand in her hair. Much like the subject of *Psyche*, her shoulder lies bare and turned towards the viewer. This is a private moment; the woman appears alone and in action. The mirror sits to the left of the woman, and in it, we see the table behind the subject set with the accoutrements of beauty. We do not see the reflection of the woman. Though the painting shows a large part of the mirror, our angle as a viewer makes the woman's back the focal point. We are not permitted to see her whole face; we do not see her reflection at all. Morisot purposely hides these details. The subject is the beholder of her image. Like in *Psyche*, the subject is modest in how she looks away. Mirrors are connected to the act of dressing; Morisot places her subject in front of a mirror to ask questions about looking and image-creation. Her women create their image, makeup, clothing, and hair in private spaces, knowing that they will venture out into the public. By painting this private space, making it on display, the artist violates that privacy. And yet,

through intentional artistic choices, Morisot's women are aware of both space and viewer. This double awareness, being in a private space and still on display, is what Morisot conveys as the discomfort of women under the male gaze. Nonetheless, she allows her female subject the agency to reject the gaze of the viewer, through image-crafting. In *Young Woman Powdering her Face* (1877), Morisot painted another woman in front of her vanity; she is simultaneously aware of how others see her and actively engaged in crafting her own image. The subject, again a young woman, sits in front of her mirror, applying makeup. As she puts on powder with her right hand, her left hand tilts the mirror towards her face. She wears a loose-fitting white undergarment. This painting offers a profile of the subject; she sits faced away from us, toward the mirror. Her reflection is hidden to us, like in *Woman at her Toilette*, but she clearly sees her own reflection. The mirror is darker than most of the painting, reflecting an unseen corner of the room. Morisot does not allow the beholder to see the reflection of the woman, and this is an intentional omission.

Young Woman Powdering her Face again shows a woman who is both aware of and crafting her own image. Morisot denies the viewer the woman's reflection and has painted her subject putting on makeup, a distinctly feminine activity. The woman doing her makeup self-consciously crafts her image. By having her female subject doing a task so tied to image crafting and changing, Morisot confronts the passive viewer, asking that viewer to see how the woman truly sees herself. Morisot's painted women refuse to be gazed upon by a voyeuristic observer but instead take a proactive approach in how they will be seen. The woman is not just her reflection, not just the makeup she puts on but the conscious creation of that self. Morisot shows the viewer that women are conscious of their appearance even when alone. She reveals the woman's genuine self and her autonomy to craft her image, thus bestowing a subjectivity on the depicted woman. The painting is successful at refusing to give the viewer a purely passive object. Morisot gives the viewer a subject actively intent upon crafting her own appearance.

Morisot painted women actively gazing at their reflections, women who are self-aware and conscious of their image. Morisot, participating in the culture of her time, knew that the intended and assumed audience of her works would be men. Yet she still painted women in feminine, private spaces, specifically looking into mirrors at themselves. Morisot uses mirrors in her works to ask what it can mean to look at the subject of a portrait and to confront viewers about how they look at women. Morisot's works push back against the constant eroticism of women in private places by her contemporary male artists. Looking at art by female painters requires a necessary "deconstruction of the masculinist myths of modernism" (Pollock 50). Morisot deconstructs the male gaze by showing that women see themselves not only from their own perspective but from that outside male perspective at the same time. The ubiquitous leering male gaze bleeds into her works, so Morisot painted women who blatantly reject

that gaze; they hide, obscure, or change their face, and confront the viewer. She intentionally painted figures who knows what they looked like, inviting a more complex and sympathetic viewpoint that sees women as multi-dimensional beings. Morisot and the painted women negotiate and challenge a patriarchal social structure, the male gaze, and the systematically undermining of their autonomy. Morisot subtly manipulates the traditional painting styles of her time to emphasize women's humanity in the ways they self-consciously craft their own images, gazing into their mirrors.

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